Fletcher Wortmann
Fan Culture
Prof. Rehak
Fandom Presentation Paper

Preaching to True Believers: The Decline of the American Comic Book Industry

It seems that the comic book (or graphic novel) is finally achieving mainstream commercial and critical success. Japanese manga has consumed shelves at most bookstores; films based on comics such as *Ghost World, Sin City* and *Road to Perdition* have achieved significant cultural impact; in 2007, Time magazine named Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* their book of the year. Yet in spite of this success one significant genre of comic books seems to be missing out: the superhero comic. In 1970, Marvel Comics temporarily cancelled their *X-Men* series due to low sales, as the book was moving just under 200,000 copies per issue ("X-Men"). In February of this year the same series, a popular and high-selling title in today's marketplace, sold only 90,410 copies ("Sales – February 2008"). How have sales fallen this far, especially given the recent popularity of superhero-related films and television programs? The answer involves the industry's strategy of catering to preexisting comics fans instead of attracting new customers. By adopting financial and creative practices designed to appeal only to preexisting fans, major publishers such as Marvel and DC comics have limited their audiences and so condemned themselves to cultural and economic decline.

The decline of American superhero comics can be blamed, at least partially, on the disappearance of comics from traditional outlets such as convenience stores and newsstands. This trend began in the 1970s, as comics sales began to fall in these mainstream venues. In response the major comic book publishers developed an agreement with a dealer named Phil Seuling to sell him unreturnable product at a

significant discount. At first this model benefited both the comics industry and comic book fans, who could now purchase comics for cheaper prices at specialty outlets that catered to their interests (Stewart). However, as comics disappeared from mainstream venues and specialty stores multiplied the trend began to have significant impact upon the audience and content of these comics. Since comics were only available at specialty shops, publishers to began to produce stories intended for an older and more sophisticated audience. Stories became more self-referential and more risqué; combined with the limited availability of comics, this discouraged a significant potential audience.

Some great work has been written since this shift in the comics industry, and some of it (including works by Alan Moore and Frank Miller) has been produced within the superhero genre by Marvel and DC Comics. However, the industry's willingness to cater to fans has reached ridiculous extremes in recent years. One example of this is the over-emphasis on intercontinuity between titles in each publisher's fictional 'universe.' The idea of an interconnected comic book 'universe' was developed as a financial stunt, as one character would 'guest-star' in another's book in hopes of increasing sales. However, in recent years continuity has taken over mainstream comics storytelling, as each new title draws upon a decades-long history of previous stories. An excellent example of this is the recent DC Comics series *Infinite Crisis*. The miniseries, described by online comics reviewer Jim Roeg as "a disconnected assemblage of money shots, plot-hammers, and non sequiturs, strung together not so much in a narrative as in a kind of postmodern pastiche", had the primary narrative function of destroying DC Comics' 'multiverse' (a series of parallel fiction universes) and explaining away a number of contradictory stories from previous years. The commercially successful (though

critically reviled) story was immediately followed by the weekly limited series *52*, which, along with the supplementary four-issue miniseries *World War III*, served to reintroduce the same fictional multiverse that had just been destroyed. These stories rely heavily on the established, decades-long continuity between DC Comics titles, and are so dependent on the minutia of fictional worlds as to render them virtually unreadable to the non-fan.

Even if a non-fan were able to comprehend such stories, the increasingly extreme content of modern superhero comics would be likely to repel them. As the audience for superhero comics have aged and matured, so have the comics themselves become more explicit. Marvel Comics' series *Marvel Zombies* featured a flesh-eating, undead Spider-man murdering and cannibalizing his wife and aunt, and the comic *Avengers #71* bizarrely implied that the superhero Ant-man used his size-changing superpowers to pleasure his wife. The most infamous example of recent years, however, is prose author Brad Meltzer's series *Identity Crisis*, which featured the rape of a supporting character by a minor supervillain. *Identity Crisis'* juxtaposition of superheroes with horrific acts of sexual violence demonstrates the solipsism of American comics; the industry and its fans have become so ensnared in these closed superhero universes that they have failed to recognize how wildly incongruous their stories have become. Characters created to entertain children are now featured in stories for adults, and as a result neither audience (with the exception of the fan) is satisfied.

The industry has, in fairness, attempted to attract new audiences with various promotional schemes and new publishing ventures. Yet these efforts inevitably fail to attract new readers. Marvel Comics recently promoted its *Civil War* miniseries as a political allegory, with superheroes facing government registration as a metaphor for the

erosion of civil liberties, and the series received enough publicity to earn an article in the New York Times. Yet as the story continued and the plot became more ludicrous (later issues featured a cyborg clone of the Norse god Thor), the story only served to further highlight the bizarre juxtaposition of fantasy superhero elements with adult storytelling and was forgotten by the mainstream media. Marvel also hoped to attract new readers by expanding to other genres with an adaptation of Steven King's *Dark Tower* series, and although the series initially received "a lot of hype and real-world advertising" comics retailer Mike Sterling notes that "[a] lot of the new people coming to the shop specifically for *Dark Tower* dropped off right quick" without purchasing other titles (Sterling). Most bizarre was a recent crossover between Marvel Comics' superhero characters and the soap opera series *The Guiding Light*. Marvel Assistant Manager of Sales Communication Jim McCann stated that the story was designed to encourage "new customers & fans" and "a growing comic market" the crossover was met with general derision from both comics and soap opera fans ("Mattbrady")

There has been a great deal of speculation recently about the commercial viability of media franchises designed specifically to appeal to fans. With the advent of the internet, media content can be distributed cheaply, and even a small number of dedicated fans may be able to justify the existence of a property. The plight of the great American superhero comics publishers serves as a textbook example of how such a strategy can go wrong. Rather than using fan interest to support a mainstream media property Marvel and DC Comics have allowed fans to hijack their business, and have suffered both commercially and creatively as a result. The future looks bright for the graphic novel as

a form of art; that of the American superhero comic, however, and those who have historically profited from it, seems far bleaker.

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